DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 820 CS 204 968

AUTHOR Uehling, Edward H.
TITLE The Muse and the College of Engineering: Composition without Literature.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); English Curriculum; *English Instruction; *Essays; *Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Literary Styles; Literature; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Those who argue for the inclusion of literature in composition courses point out that English teachers must teach from their area of expertise and that the use of literature endorses creative and imaginative use of language, avoids what is merely utilitarian and boring, and promotes growth in thinking. Those who oppose the use of literature in teaching composition argue future social utility and personal welfare, conceive of students as bureaucratic communicators, and concentrate on teaching subskills. The intentions of both groups seem possible and necessary. Using the prose essay as well as poetry, fiction, and drama allows students to see the connection between form and content and to use a form that they will regularly use. Composition teachers need to see their courses as beginning a process, as helping the students' interest and belief in language support a general growth of intellectual curiosity, and as service courses. To regard the prose essay as literature is crucial to a clear perception of composition. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED173820

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Edward M. Uehling

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The Muse and the College of Engineering: Composition Without Literature

Edward M. Uehling

Departments of English, characteristically recognized as great infighters, have enjoyed few battles more than that concerning literature in composition. Mere mention of the issue calls to mind endless flurries of verbal rabbit punching from within the close quarters of a graduate assistant's cubicle, a department coffee lounge, or a committee room. Even our journals promote the topic in terms of a boxing marquee: two recent articles--one from College English, the other from College Composition and Communication--indicate as much in titles which begin "Comp. vs. Lit."

Unlike most other fights, however, ours began without a predetermined time limit and seems no less energetic in its middle rounds than at any other point in its history. Perhaps such extraordinary vigor may be attributed to human nature (yes, even in English departments); but it must also result from composition's newfound respectability and--closely related--from recent obvious

CS204968

shifts in student enrollments. In truth, if our debate ultimately bears little resemblance to a boxing match, it is not because we can't throw a mean punch with a gloved fist. It is because the stakes for the fight and even its audience keep changing.

Those who argue for the inclusion of literature in a composition course often begin by asserting that we must teach from our area of expertise: that because most of us have been trained primarily or exclusively to be literary scholars, we can speak with authority--even in the composition classroom--only if we depend on that background. Moreover, the argument goes, what better way to ensure focus and college-level integrity in a skills-building course than to introduce a theme or themes based on works of literature?

Such a stance, of course, both affirms and rejects. Broadly, it endorses the imaginative and creative use of language in communication; at the same time it intends to avoid what is merely utilitarian and therefore boring. In fact, most advocates of lit. in comp. would find support in Wallace Douglas' grouping of composition teachers. In a recent review of E. D. Hirsch's Philosophy of Composition, Douglas begins by sorting us into two categories. Most numerous, he says, "are those who, asserting reasons of future social utility and personal welfare, and conceiving the students as bureaucratic communicators, at least in posse, concentrate their teaching on the various sub-skills which can be said to make up Writing Skill or Ability." He suspects the source of this tradition to be "the literacy crisis." The

second group, he says, "conceives of even first-year composition as a legitimate part of General or, indeed, Liberal Education; that is, neither a preparation nor a pre-requisite for it; and similarly, neither professional nor technical training, but rather an activity, a learning that contributes to a general development of the mind, . . . a general sort of growth in 'thinking' . . . ."[1] And here is where the problem lies, I think: most of us see Douglas' distinction as not only perceptive but unavoidable; the lit. in comp. advocates would go a step further in claiming exclusive rights to the goals of the latter group.

However, the intentions of both groups described by Douglas seem possible and necessary in a composition class--with or without the inclusion of literature. Official descriptions of our composition programs at least claim a share in general or liberal education. College catalogues clearly define introductory composition courses as requirements within that framework. And if freshmen students don't read the catalogues, they may read English department bulletins which similarly delineate course objectives in rather ambitious terms. Our statement at Valparaiso describes the work of only one semester, not two; otherwise it probably sounds familiar:

> By the end of this course the student should be able to communicate personal experience vividly and coherently and to present ideas in a lucid, logical and persuasive manner. The student should also have learned to respond intelligently, judiciously, and analytically to the experience, the ideas, and the opinions of other writers, and should be able to generalize accurately and to support generalizations by specific, pertinent particulars of proof. The student should have become acquainted with various methods of

> developing an idea or presenting an argument and have learned to choose the methods most appropriate for a particular purpose. After becoming familiar with library resources, the student is expected to employ these compositional skills in the writing of a brief research paper. The student should have learned, finally, to love and respect language as a unique human resource and to take delight and pride in using it accurately and sensitively.

Give or take a research paper, these are the stated intentions of most composition programs.

For all its intentions, though, such a statement says nothing about the means by which they might be accomplished nor about the equally complex matter of the audience to whom they are addressed. A consideration of these crucial issues leaves little or no room for literature, at least as lit. in comp. advocates define it.

Their exclusion of the prose essay as a literary genre points up potentially serious dangers in their approach. First, it implies that poetry, fiction, and drama are superior modes of expression; that the prose essay is, at best, only a more or less functional means of communication. Yet we label our courses exposition and argument (or something to that effect), insist that they be required, and hand out declarations--much like the one cited above--which at least implicitly encourage creative and imaginative prose composition. Surely our students, not to mention our colleagues in other disciplines, may wonder what exactly we are up to. Moreover, some students will see such a definition of literature as confirmation of their long-standing suspicion that English and English teachers have precious little to do with the business of the real world--academic or otherwise. However wrong-headed that response may be, it works against the students'

development as thinkers and writers.

The restrictive description of literature also reflects on the uses of readings in the classroom. Most instructors would agree that an anthology selection has three primary functions in a composition class: as a model of style; as a demonstration of various rhetorical patterns; as a source of ideas. Ideally, by examining any piece of writing in all of these ways, we underscore the close connection between form and content. However, discussions of poetry, fiction, or drama can serve all three functions well only if students themselves are to write poems, short stories, and plays or if the course intends to be a conventional introduction to literature as well as to writing.

Now, we may spend altogether too much class time in talking about the writing of others. That is a separate issue. But whatever the amount, such time ought to contribute specifically to the writing tasks our students face. We can fully discuss the prose essay as a literary genre because it is the kind of writing our students engage in. If we attempt similarly full discussions of poetry, fiction, and drama, they very likely become ends in themselves. On the other hand, while I am not convinced that the essay is an inferior source of ideas, I am convinced that to treat any piece of literature as only a source of ideas--as strictly a means to an end--is to mistreat it.

The dilemma advocates of lit. in comp. face, then, concerns the organizational principle of their course and its emphasis. If the course has thematic focus ("the alienation of modern man" and "the need for meaning" are two with which I am familiar), how much time must be devoted to works of literature which

develop that theme? What kinds of written responses will be required of students? What differences will exist in the rhetorical structure of each? How much time will students need to adopt such patterns of organization in their thinking and writing? Perhaps it is possible simultaneously to maintain two points of focus: one, the developing theme; the other, a progressive sequence of expository and argumentative patterns. But that hope seems little different from examining alternative tables of contents in a composition reader: finally, one arrangement is preferable.

As teachers of composition in 1979, we find ourselves in an awkward situation. Increased public and professional interest in the teaching of writing may strengthen our position, but more certainly demands that we speak clearly and persuasively. Not all of our new attention is sympathetic or well-informed. Perhaps the most difficult response comes from some of our colleagues in the professional schools. They raise the "back to the basics" cry in part to blame us for past student failures, but also to argue for reduced liberal arts requirements. Such pressure may lead us to make one of two mistakes. One, we may nod agreement to the alarmist notion of a "literacy crisis" and ask for more credit hours and more staff to deal with it. Or we may bristle at this newest demonstration of trade school mentality and vow to save students from themselves and a misguided faculty. If students take fewer literature electives, if required introductions to literature have shrunk or disappeared, we will do the best we can with what remains--literature in composition.

Neither reaction meets the issue head on. The first puts us dangerously close to those who equate good writing with mechanical correctness. The second is no less a compromise because in attempting to solve separate concerns by squeezing them together, it serves neither the subjects nor the students well. Both reactions, coming from a "last-stand" attitude, bear more than a hint of defeat.

A more appropriate stance will develop as we arrive at an understanding among ourselves about the nature and purpose of freshman composition. Then we will be able to address our critics and our supporters with conviction. What our colleagues need to believe is this: first, that freshman composition only begins a process for which all of us are responsible; second, that in the limited space of one or two semesters students will do well if their interest and belief in language supports a general growth of intellectual curiosity; third, that composition can be a service course only as it fulfills this second aim.

To regard the prose essay as literature is crucial to our clear perception of composition. It is the most appropriate genre for discussion in a composition class because it is the least likely to intimidate or distract our students. Much contemporary poetry, fiction, and drama is deliberately ambiguous and exhibits a different kind of coherence from that we expect in expository prose. The prose essay, on the other hand, provides a more suitable vehicle for meeting the philosophic demands in both of Professor Douglas' categories: it suits both

the muse and the college of engineering. For instance, if we want students to consider a topic such as man's mortality, should we turn to Emily Dickinson's "[Because I could not stop for Death--]," Donne's "Death, Be Not Proud," or Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych"? Or, in the limited time available, what would we sacrifice by choosing instead E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake"? The subtle style, tone and arrangement of the essay skillfully support White's point of view. It is a thoughtful, provocative piece of literature and an admirable model of organization.

I have taught composition with and without poetry, fiction, and drama. In each case I like to think that many of the students were better writers and thinkers when they finished than when they began, if for no other reason than practice. But when I have relied wholly on the prose essay, I believe my students have become more systematic--better strategists--with a clearer idea of how they can continue to progress as writers. Teachers of composition cannot afford to make the false distinction that we serve either the muse or the college of engineering. We must serve both, and we will do it well without the poem, short story, or play.

Edward M. Uehling

Valparaiso University

ENDNOTE

[1] College English, 40, No. 1 (Sept. 1978), 90.